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War in Laos Imperils the Survival of Meo Tribes

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The tough and fierce Meo mountain tribesmen of Laos, retreating before the North Vietnamese invaders, are nearing the end of the mountains and the limits of their strength. Their survival in their traditional pattern of life has become a matter of concern to them and to their friends.

The Meo, who in their fight against the North Vietnamese are supported and advised by the United States Central Intelligence Agency, have been moving southward from deep within China for centuries—nomads of the highlands, slashing and burning rice fields out of the wooded mountainsides and moving on when the soil is exhausted.

Hostile pressure has sometimes speeded their southward move, but there have always been mountains ahead of them.

Now the advance of the North Vietnamese, coming out of the region of their own Meo minority around Dienbienphu during the last decade, has steadily driven the Meo of Laos to the south and the west until they find themselves near the edge of the mountains.

Stretching ahead to the broad Mekong River lies the Vientiane Plain. Beyond that is the flat paddy land of Thailand, and then the sea.

The Meo, a small people of Chinese appearance who are easily distinguished from the brown-skinned Laotians, find the plain oppressively hot because they have always lived at heights up to 5,000 feet. Furthermore, they have no taste for life in the larger communities of the plain.

As the military situation deteriorates, rockets have been falling almost daily on Long Tieng, the mountain redoubt that the Meo consider their last bastion. The missiles have shaken the faith of the Meo because their most powerful leader, Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, has always told them that Long Tieng is invulnerable and that when the war was won they would return northward to the lands from which they have been driven.

Last month the Meo again set out for the south, leaving the settlements around Long

Tieng and trudging in thin columns through the mountains. Americans who have long been close to the hill tribe—the name is pronounced May-oh—estimate that about 100,

Knowledgeable observers report that the United States and General Vang Pao are the sources of what the ordinary Meo need to live. Permanently on the move as they are, they depend on the United States for almost all the necessities of life.

for the first time in such a setting of a search for a haven for his people. He drew a gloomy picture of the outlook for the annual Communist dry-season offensive than gathering strength and predicted the loss of Long Tieng.

General Vang Pao is reported to be more optimistic now, buoyed by at least four Thai battalions and by three Laotian battalions from other regions that, under his command, are participating effectively in the defense of Long Tieng.

That has resulted in a halt in the general southward move, but the search for a lasting solution, if such can be found, continues.

Example of the Tibetans

Chao Saykham, who has been Governor of Xiengkhouang Province, a principal center of Meo life, for 26 years, was found at his home the other day reading a book about the fate of the Tibetans. The Governor, whose princely title, Chao, identifies him as a member of the former royal family of Xiengkhouang and not as a Meo, said he was studying the fate of another mountain people defeated and massacred in great numbers by a Communist "war of national liberation."

A responsible American commented that Chao Saykham, widely respected as one of the rare Laotian leaders with a sympathetic interest in the mountain people, had given up the fight. The American added that the Meo had been "blown white" and were exhausted and could not be asked to do much more fighting.

The tribesmen, by all accounts, have been as good a fighting force as the Laotian Government has had, but their losses have been catastrophic. The extent is difficult to determine because even their numbers are subject to varied estimates in this country, whose population is put at two million to three million. Guesses on the number of Meo range from 150,000 to 300,000.

Even a brief visit to a Meo area or group discloses one essential fact: The number of able-bodied young men is disproportionately small compared with the numbers of women, children and aged or invalid men.

In the last decade according to knowledgeable sources, 10,000 men have been killed in action; the annual rate of battle deaths over the last three years



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Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, who told the Meo people Long Cheng was invulnerable, has been losing their confidence because of almost daily attacks.

000 are either on the move or have temporarily stopped wandering until their leaders tell them to stay or until the enemy draws near.

The heart of the area around which they are gathering, the American-run relief center of Ban Xon, was struck last week by enemy guerrilla squads. Meo are nervous.

Americans have been close to the Meo because the military interests of the United States and the Meo leaders coincide, and the United States has been feeding the Meo and arming, supplying and paying their soldiers for years.

No Strong Allegiance

That has been done largely outside the Laotian Government's channels because the Meo feel no strong allegiance to it and because direct dealings have been found more efficient in view of the bureaucracy and corruption in Vientiane. Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Premier, a pragmatic man who values the military efficiency thus achieved, has offered no objection.

Now that the enemy has struck at Ban Xon, an alternate site is under construction.

The Key Question Now

To many people sympathetic to the Meo the question is no longer where to move them in temporary safety and how to enable them to make a new stand against the North Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao allies but, rather, whether the time has come to move them out of the war while there are still enough men left to assure the nation's survival.

The mountain region that General Vang Pao and Laotian and American friends of the Meo have in mind lies southeast of Long Tieng. It is thinly settled by pro-Pathet Lao Meo, with whom an accommodation could perhaps be reached. General Vang Pao has made such temporary, local arrangements, although they were eventually upset by the North Vietnamese.

The general, who effectively replaced the traditional political Meo chieftains by virtue of the power and patronage conferred by the United States, is known as a moody man who passes mercurially from periods of military optimism to spells of deep depression, in which he has frequently talked of leading the Meo out of the war.

Last Jan. 16, at an annual meeting with about 400 tribal leaders at Long Tieng, he spoke deathly over the last three years

6,000 Treated in a year

No estimate is available on the number of civilians killed in the fighting, but when the hospital at Sam Thong was functioning as the chief medical facility for the Meo, about 6,000 soldiers and civilians wounded in military action were treated in a year.

Apart from the toll of the fighting, reliable sources report that the trauma of migration leads to a death rate of 15 per cent in the first year. Moreover, the average Meo infant mortality rate—49 in 100 in the first year of life—rises steeply during unsettled periods.

Since the North Vietnamese began their invasion of northern Laos in force in the 1965-66 dry season, the entire Meo population has been on the move.

General Vang Pao's army, after a stepped-up recruiting effort, numbers more than 10,000. Little by little the number of other mountain tribesmen, largely upland Lao, has been growing until the Meo are in a minority.

The number of 12-year-old and 13-year-old fighting men in the General's forces, appear even higher than among regular Laotian units. Although there is no effective draft, youngsters are impressed under clan and family pressure.

"The older ones always send their younger brothers," said Touby Lyfong, who was the uncrowned "king of the Meo" until General Vang Pao became the leader. "The little ones are not afraid, but they cannot carry the heavier arms. The kids become soldiers because at 18, the others marry and start worrying about their wives and children."

The Meo are polygamous, with a religion that consists mainly of worship of the spirits of their ancestors. General Vang Pao has four wives and perhaps 20 children.

Under the growing pressure on the civilian population, a number of Meo soldiers have left their units to attend to their families. While it may be a form of desertion, it's condoned by Meo custom. It emphasizes, to many here, the need to find a solution.

The question of whether the Meo can be settled on the plain, if need be, is much discussed. The consensus is pessimistic, not only for reasons of climate but also because of the

different style of agriculture and the expected unwillingness of land-owners to make sufficient land available for so large a group of what most Laotians regard as racially inferior foreigners.

Appeal to Thai King

Mr. Louby Lyfong, who has lived in Vientiane for more than a decade, is pessimistic. He unbuttoned his shirt to show that he still gets a heat rash.

He said he talked last year to King Phumiphol Adulyadej of Thailand about bringing the Laotian Meo across the border and found the King sympathetic. The province of Sayaboury, on the west bank of the Mekong in Laos, has been mentioned by General Vang Pao, Chao Saykham and others, but only a few Meo have settled there.

Most observers believe that if Long Tieng remains in Government hands through the current dry season, the Meo will return there until next year. But many, including Americans, contend that time for temporizing measures has run out.

"It is the Meo who have stemmed the tide until now while the people in Vientiane don't give a damn," Chao Saykham said. "Pity must have its turn."